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ABSTRACT

In this paper, two magazine courses offered at Colorado State University as part of the Technical-Business Journalism concentration are described in terms of course content, class assignments, and course objectives. The course entitled "Writing for Specialized Audiences" assumes that the majority of magazines published today are edited for readers with specific informational needs. The objective of the course is to teach writers what is useful to readers in their business or activity in the shortest possible reading time. "Publication Management" is a course about the publishing business from the viewpoint of a publisher. The methods used in the course are to examine the purposes, problems, and operation of all facets of the publishing enterprise and to probe into such matters as advertising, circulation, editorials, promotions, production, research, and business office matters. The assignments given in each of the courses vary with the size of the course each semester. (RB)

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PREPARING STUDENTS FOR JOBS: MANAGING AND WRITING FOR SPECIALIZED MAGAZINES

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The two magazine courses at Colorado State University are part of the Technical-Business Journalism concentration, not the News-Editorial concentration. That differentiation significantly affects our approach to the courses. And it reinforces my prejudices formed during 12 years with specialized publications, six of those years as an editor-in-chief. I'll deal with each course separately, for one is a writing course called "Writing for Specialized Audiences;" the other is a management course titled "Publication Management."

WRITING FOR SPECIALIZED AUDIENCES

Writing for Specialized Audiences assumes the majority of magazines today are edited for readers with rather specific informational needs and wants. Many of these publications - for example, those listed in Standard Rates and Data Service Business Publications Edition - are not read for fun. They are read by people who read for practical reasons - to keep abreast of work-related developments and to get ideas on how they can do their jobs better.

Readers of other specialized publications, which range from hobby books and home service magazines to what might be termed self-improvement periodicals such as Money and Consumer's Report, are read to get greater pleasure out of one's hobby, to make housekeeping easier and rewarding, and to improve one's lot in life.

Such periodicals are not only read for the who, what, where, when, why and how, but for the significance of the information - i.e., "what's in it for me."

(more . . .)

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Thus, our emphasis is writing for people, not writing about people and events. Our objective is to give the reader the most possible information that is useful to the reader in his or her business or activity in the shortest possible reading time. We do not deal with human interest items, general think pieces, or articles which merely describe issues of the day and conclude that "somebody ought to do something" or "only time will tell." "Me and Joe" stories also are unacceptable.

Making the transition from newswriting to writing to help specific people tackle specific problems is not easy, even for so-called professionals. Several years ago I visited with the editor of a bottling magazine who was quite upset with the quality of material provided by his stringers who, at the time, primarily were newspaper people. "If a bottling plant burns down," the editor bemoaned, "all the blankety-blanks can think about is the leaping flames. What concerns my readers is whether or not the plant will be rebuilt. When? How will it be equipped? In the meantime, what percent of the market is up for grabs and how can it best be grabbed?"

Though a number of short assignments help cross that bridge, the student spends most of the semester writing one major article. For an educational experience, I prefer the student to spend an unrealistic amount of time doing one piece well than to grind out several inadequate pieces in a more realistic time allotment.

The student may select any topic about which to write, but the article must meet three standards.

1) It must deal with a specific problem the reader may encounter in his or her job, hobby, or personal resource management.

2) It must provide the reader with enough data to make a decision as to what the reader will do - now - to deal with or to attempt to actively resolve the problem. Of course, no single solution may be universally applicable.

In such cases, I expect a number of alternatives and the circumstances under which each is most applicable to be discussed.

3) It must include first-hand information from real, live people, other than the author - not just material from books and other articles.

Representative article topics include how to run a one-person sports department on a small daily (which was published in Editor and Publisher); simplified soil testing techniques for highway construction (which appeared in a construction periodical); mountains for novice climbers and how to climb them (which was used by a backpacking magazine); solving temporary-help problems in hospitals; profit-producing tips for rental store franchisees; improving response by disadvantaged groups to adult education programs; selecting, stocking and maintaining the salt-water aquarium; and, of course, consumer-type articles on choosing skiing, hiking, bicycling equipment and the like.

Assignments

A difficult aspect of the course is getting students to identify with the readers' needs. To address that issue, a take-home midterm early in the semester includes two assignments:

1) One assignment is to rewrite a news release about a business event for each of three or four different audiences; for example, customers, suppliers, investors, and/or competitors. The purpose is to stress the notion that different audiences may be interested in the same subject, but for quite different reasons; that different audiences may face different problems related to the same issue.

2) In the second assignment, the student is placed in the role of a financial columnist, a la Sylvia Porter. The task is to write a 500-word piece about a day-to-day personal money management problem such as, "Should I put my savings account in a bank, savings and loan, or industrial bank?" (An industrial bank is a Colorado peculiarity, as far as I know.)

Another difficulty is getting students to avoid articles which deal with broad-sweeping problems such as world hunger; to get students out of the newspaper and popular magazine "feature" syndrome; and to narrow topics so students are able to deal with them meaningfully given the limitations of money, time and distance. Problems of the universe initially seem more appealing to many than do day-to-day problems of individuals.

To force a narrowing of the topics, I ask for five to 10 story ideas. Each idea must define a problem, who is interested in each problem, why they're interested, and what specific action the reader might take upon reading the article. Although free-lancing is not the point of the course, students also are asked to identify periodicals in which their story might appear to reach their target readers and to do a brief market analysis of the periodicals cited. Some students do attempt to market their stories and several have been successful.

After a final story idea is approved as 1) meeting the criteria of the assignment and 2) possible to do from a base in Ft. Collins, students submit a Research Design. The Research Design, besides elaborating on the points in the initial idea proposal, includes a list of questions the reader might want answered to facilitate decision-making and action, the advantages and disadvantages of possible solutions to the issue at hand, and specific sources of information (names, titles, phone numbers, addresses). This initial work is extremely important. Nearly all students who don't do a thoughtful job on the preliminaries run into major problems later on.

Each article is submitted twice. When the first drafts are turned in, class is cancelled and individual conferences of a half hour or more are scheduled to go over the drafts, which I edit heavily. I attempt to edit the copy - conceptually as well as mechanically - as I would if I were the editor of the

magazine for which the article is intended and were editing the article to send to production.

Graphics

Because we attempt to communicate applied information quickly and clearly, graphics may play a major role in fulfilling an assignment. In some cases, photos, tables, graphs or drawings may communicate concepts more clearly than words alone. Thus, we deal with preparing graphics concurrently with text rather than, as is often the case in print journalism, writing something and then attempting to come up with some sort of illustration just to be "colorful."

Perception

To attempt to get away from the tendency to tell people how to solve problems rather to advise them, we spend several weeks in what I call humility training. That means we try to take communication theory out of the abstract and apply it - see it in action - not only with other folks, but with ourselves. Using William Haney's "Communication and Organizational Behavior," we examine how perceptual difference and attitudes affect the seeking, interpreting and transmitting of information. We study Haney's patterns of miscommunication which may be factors in accurate interpretive writing. The midterm on this segment of the course presents situations to test the student's ability to think critically and to identify and cope with perceptual difference. Haney's book has many examples of such situations.

To transfer contrived situations to reality, groups of three to four students go out to observe the communication process at work. They observe city council meetings, debates, police at work, or whatever - not for what is communicated - but for how it is communicated, and for the miscommunication that may occur and to see how attitudes affect message sending and receiving. Each group presents an oral report of its experience to the class and submits a report to me on the group's own communication problems. The class grades the

the presentation on a predetermined rating scale based on communication concepts discussed in Haney's book and in class.

Results

Writing for Specialized Audiences seems to work well. Student evaluations place it among the top courses in the department. By the end of the semester, most students are more objective about the worth of their copy, can edit themselves more effectively, and, of particular importance, become reader-oriented, rather than event oriented. And many find the personal relationship with readers exciting and rewarding. The theory-related portion of the course enhances fairness in reporting and helps students recognize and deal with their own biases, which many students are amazed to discover they have.

A healthy percentage of our graduates wind up in some aspect of specialized writing. Recent graduates found work with agricultural publications, an oil magazine, an agronomy publication, and a tennis magazine to name a few.

PUBLICATION MANAGEMENT

Publication Management is a course about the publishing business from the viewpoint of a publisher. The method is to examine the purposes, problems and operation of all facets of the publishing enterprise; to crack editorial chauvinism by showing how each function depends on the other for a periodical's survival. We probe advertising, circulation, editorial, promotion, production, research and business office matters.

Our thinking is that specialized publications tend to have relatively small staffs and those staff members tend to become more directly involved in non-editorial matters than their counterparts who work for larger publications and many daily newspapers.

But no matter what periodical one works for, the performance of non-editorial people clearly affects the editorial department in one way or another.

And if an editor is good, he or she may be promoted. As promotions come, one gets further and further from writing and reporting and more and more involved in policy, budgets, management problems and liaison with other publishing roles.

Ideally, each student prepares a working prospectus for a new publication of the student's choice, outlining the advertising and editorial markets served, establishing staffing patterns, methods of operation, budgets, projected income and expenses, and scheduling for each department, and concluding with a projected profit and loss statement for the first year of operation. Particular emphasis is placed on the periodical's market coverage, penetration and advertising sales plan as well as on an analysis of the editorial slant, how it is designed to serve the projected reader market, and how editorial content and market coverage compare with direct and indirect competition in the chosen market. The prospectus is designed 1) to be used as a basis for securing financing for the periodical and 2) to show prospective key employees that the idea has some solid thinking and planning behind it. The prospectus is submitted in sections. The portion for each department is submitted after class discussion of that particular publishing responsibility. Then the final, polished prospectus is due at the end of the semester.

We attempt to have a number of people from the publishing business talk about the management aspects of their respective periodicals and departments. This fall, we have scheduled the Regional Manager for McGraw-Hill Publications Company, Western Advertising Manager for Skiing, Skiing Trade News and Ski Racing, the Publisher of the Limosin Journal (a cattle breed book) the Circulation Director (a CSU journalism graduate) of Nelson Crow Publications, and the Publishers of a local weekly and the town daily. We've also had people from bank business loan departments discuss the proposals from a lending risk perspective. The guest speakers have been willing to donate their time and to pay their travel expenses. Fortunately, Denver, only 65 miles away, is a good and willing source, especially for advertising and circulation people.

The course's chief value, aside from denting the editorial provincialism mentioned previously, is the opening of eyes to journalism-related careers other than writing and reporting. At least two students in the last few years started their own publications. A bunch more decided not to take the risk after taking the course.

Obviously, the course has a heavy commercial orientation. And we deal with much detail. For example, how much is your office equipment going to cost? What's your projected advertising revenue? Justify your projection. What's your anticipated postal bill? For these reasons, I think, the student evaluations are slightly less enthusiastic than those for Writing for Specialized Audiences. But the course has the most positive feedback of any course I teach from students after they graduate, particularly those who work for magazines and weekly newspapers. Even students who edit house organs say they've whipped out their old prospectus and applied the principles to their publication.

Unfortunately, I find enrollments over 20 preclude the individual prospectus approach. Last fall, in a class of 30, I tried a group prospectus, which I thought proved unsatisfactory. I had to arbitrate too many disputes. Last spring, with a class of 40, I assigned an operations and marketing analysis of two real, competing publications in lieu of a prospectus. That was reasonably satisfactory, but I suspect it won't take long for some publications to tire of mailing information to Ft. Collins every semester. A file of such data could be useful, but it would become outdated rather quickly. So I'm still struggling with the problem. I can procrastinate, though. Fewer than 20 signed up for fall semester, so it's back to the individual prospectus approach for the time being.

I hope this brief outline of how we at Colorado State attempt to prepare students for magazine work has generated a useful idea or two. I'm sorry I am not here to answer questions you may have. But I'll do my best to deal with them by phone or mail if you choose. Thank you for listening.